

# Child and Family Services Update

March 17, 2003

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## My *Antwone Fisher* Experience

By Reba Nissen

Richard Anderson recently sent an email, bringing our attention to the editorial by Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton and House Majority Leader Tom DeLay published in February 25<sup>th</sup> issue of USA Today

([http://www.usatoday.com/news/opinion/editorials/2003-02-25-clinton-delay\\_x.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/news/opinion/editorials/2003-02-25-clinton-delay_x.htm)). The editorial highlights the impact the film *Antwone Fisher* (rated PG-13 for violence, language and mature thematic material involving abuse, <http://www2.foxsearchlight.com/antwonefisher/main.php>) is having, raising our awareness about the way we finance our foster care system and the need for change.

I want to share my experience seeing *Antwone Fisher* and the reminders the movie gave me, beyond the concerns of public policy and appropriations. I heard about the film from my co-worker, Out-of-Home Specialist Angela Oliver Khairallah, and together, we planned an after-hours field trip to see the film with others from the State Office.

Five of us sat side-by-side in the theater, and watched, as the movie opened with a dream sequence. Little Antwone Fisher was standing in a field outside a big white barn, and the doors opened to him, inside were many people, all smiling, dressed differently, representing his family, his culture, his ancestry, his identity. They stood around a large table, filled to overflowing with food of all kinds, again unique to his family, culture, and ancestry. Antwone was led to the head of the table and a place was made for him to sit down and many hands reached out to feed him. This scene takes on more meaning as the story unfolds. More profoundly than ever, it illustrated to me how important a child's connection to his or her family and cultural identity is.

Our practice principle **Permanency** states "All children need and are entitled to enduring relationships that provide a family, stability, and belonging and a sense of self that connects children to their past, present, and future." The story of *Antwone Fisher* is a story of the failure of the foster care system to ensure those relationships that provide a family, stability, and belonging. It is also the story of the disconnected survivor, Antwone, triumphing against all odds and reclaiming his connections to his past, present, and future. This practice principle came alive for me as I watched the movie.

**The movie served as a reminder to me of how important locating kin and providing family visits are.** Antwone may have been disconnected from his kin because of the child welfare agency's lack of action in locating his kin when he was placed. I realized the long-term consequences this can have for foster children who graduate from the system at 18 and ask themselves, "Whom do I belong to?" Beyond placement, even when visits with parents may not have been a possibility, siblings,

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grandparents, aunts, uncles, and other relations could have provided Antwone with the connection to family he needed.

**I was reminded of how necessary it is to do as much of our work as we can in the context of a Child and Family Team.** I noticed that when Antwone was young, he took no notice of the “agency” folks in his life, and that his world was really in his foster home and neighborhood. This highlighted for me that as child welfare workers, we will not be as central in the lives of young children we work with, as their family members, immediate caregivers, and other, more frequent contacts are, such as school teachers. Our role with young children will more often be to support those who have relationships with them and that means bringing them together to assess and plan.

The movie reminded me that we need to recognize resiliency in children and youth, add this information to their Functional Assessments, and use it to create a plan that builds on their strengths. **Antwone reads, draws, and writes poetry. These things served as an outlet to him, kept him safe, and helped him to survive. I once met a child in our care who told his therapist that he liked to cook. This information didn't make it to a Functional Assessment or a team meeting and his foster mom wasn't aware of it. The boy was struggling in school and in his placement, and the fact that he liked to cook may have helped him succeed where he was failing.**

I was reminded of the value of connecting with our coworkers and sharing our stories and experiences of the work. When we do this we learn from each other and feel supported. **After the movie, four of us went to dinner to talk about our reactions to the film. I was glad I saw this movie with my co-workers! Before we even started talking about the movie, I felt that we had a shared understanding through our Child and Family Services Practice Model. I also knew that each of us had watched the movie through our unique cultural and experiential lenses. As we began to talk, I learned more about myself, my co-workers, and the work that we do. I also felt that talking with each other affirmed our belief in our practice principles and the skills we use to do our work.**